

Food crisis in Haiti: a ruptured process?

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Eight years ago, a number of rice farmers and their families decided they could no longer stand life in Haiti. Pooling together their meagre savings, they bought a canoe and headed for the Turks and Caicos Islands. On their 150 mile journey the canoe sank and the 60 passengers trying to escape an unbearable situation lost their lives.¹ Two weeks ago, another party made up again of dozens of Haitians driven to desperation by hunger set off in a canoe which capsized 20 meters off the coast, claiming another 20 lives. Almost a decade has passed between the two voyages, but the victims met the same fate.

Both poverty and migration have a long history in Haiti. The same can be said of food shortages, a problem which began years ago due to the irresponsibility of local elites along with the structural adjustment programme of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB), which imposed rapid liberalisation reforms on the country in the 1990s. But in recent months, a combination of factors has thrown Haiti and dozens of other countries into an even deeper crisis. The UN estimates that 100 million people are destined to sink into poverty, a silent tsunami which will effectively wipe out the advances in human development made over the last ten years.²

The crisis in Haiti is nothing less than a giant step backwards for the peace, stabilisation and consolidation process which began back in 2004. In April, violent disturbances took place throughout Haiti, the whole country ground to a halt, and the prime minister was ousted. As Haiti sank deeper into chaos, neither the government nor the United Nations Mission (MINUSTAH) was able to do anything to check the unrest in which four Haitians lost their lives along with a UN policeman from Nigeria.

The factors behind the crisis

The world food crisis, which began in April, is the result of a number of factors. The price of corn and wheat has risen between 30 and 130 percent in recent years. Rice has doubled in price (or tripled according to some sources) since January 2008.³ Both stronger demand and weaker supply have affected dozens of states which are net importers of food commodities. Demographic increases and the consumption rates of emerging nations such as India and China have contributed to the strong demand.⁴

In addition, arable land dedicated to bio-fuel crops, poor harvests in several countries, and a drop in farming on account of the already high price of fertilisers, have all contributed to reducing supply. Besides the supply and demand dynamic, the volatility of international markets,

¹ Dobbs, Michael, "Free Market Left Haiti's Rice Growers Behind", Washington Post Foreign Service, Thursday, April 13, 2000, page A01.

² Head of the World Food Program, April 22, 2008. BBC News.

³ "Issues Note for Special Meeting of the Economic and Social Council on Global Food Crisis", May 20, 2008. http://www.un.org/ecosoc/docs/pdfs/Food_crisis_Issues_note_may_2008.pdf. Other reports suggest that the price of rice has tripled from \$380 a ton to \$1000. See Walden Bello, "Manufacturing a Food Crisis", *The Nation*, May 16.

⁴ Meat consumption has risen, requiring greater amounts of grain for cattle breeding. For example; Lean, Geoffrey, "Multinationals make billions in profit out of growing global food crisis - Speculators blamed for driving up price of basic foods as 100 million face severe hunger", *The Independent*, May 4, 2008.

the weak dollar, the refuge which commodity markets offer investors, as well as financial speculation, have all played a part in the price increases. These factors have all contributed directly or indirectly to the soaring price of staple foods and millions have joined the ranks of the 854 million people who already suffer hunger and malnutrition throughout the world.⁵

Whilst the present situation has caused more or less violent disturbances in several countries, price increases are merely the visible symptom which masks more complex underlying problems. Many countries such as Haiti are not self-sufficient, and price increases add to import costs for already stretched and debt-ridden state budgets. In the year 2000, the situation in Haiti was unsustainable due to a lack of foreign currency which is vital to buy foodstuffs from abroad, mainly from the US. The food crisis is not, in consequence, circumstantial, but rather structural, and it is very difficult to see prices coming down again in the medium term.

Clorox hunger and mud biscuits

In Haiti, demonstrations began in the city of Les Cayes in the south of the country and spread to other cities such as Port-au-Prince. A few days later, the public demonstrations were dubbed “Clorox hunger protests” because the sensation caused by not eating for days is comparable to that of swallowing bleach.

Price increases are making life even more difficult for the 56 percent of Haitians who live in extreme poverty, and the 76 percent of the population who already live on less than two dollars a day.⁶ More and more people have been forced to resort to biscuits made of mud (made from a little oil, some salt and mud) in order to survive. These biscuits are far from being a novelty in Haiti, but the news was published in international media outlets in February. “When there’s nothing else left to eat, there’s always mud - which is another way of saying Haiti has still further to go in its descent into hell.”⁷ Entire families in rural areas have survived by selling mud to biscuit “manufacturers” in the capital of a country where six out of every ten people cannot count on even one square meal a day. The World Food Programme (WFP) hands out 800,000 meals every day and, due to the current crisis, it is forecast that it will have to double its current distribution efforts.

Global phenomena have particular effects on countries like Haiti which is proportional to the level of national production, dependence and import needs. In Haiti the liberalisation reforms put paid to cheap local rice markets and destroyed several national industries. Today, national rice production barely covers 20 percent of internal demand.⁸ The country has to import more than 50 percent of its food which makes it highly dependent on world markets. Between 25 and 30 percent of the national budget is dedicated to commodity imports, and rice imports alone account for \$270 million.⁹

US shipments of 200,000 tons of rice each year currently make Haiti America’s fourth largest rice export market after Japan, Mexico and Canada.¹⁰ This puts the country in a difficult situation since the importance of this market for the US means there is little or no incentive for the Americans or the international community at large to promote Haitian national agriculture production and food independence. In contrast, the recent trade agreement with the same

⁵ Zoellick, Robert B., “La nouvelle donne alimentaire mondiale”, *Le Monde*, May 11-12, 2008, p.13

⁶ “Document de Stratégie Nationale pour la Croissance et la Réduction de la Pauvreté DSNCRP” (2008-2010). November 2007, Republic of Haiti, <http://www.mpce.gouv.ht/dsncrpfinal.pdf>, p.32.

⁷ Etwareea, Ram, “Des galettes de boue pour tout repas”, *Courrier International*, February 1, 2008

⁸ Haiti’s current population stands at 9.4 million people growing at a year-on-year rate of 1.6 percent. It is the Caribbean’s most densely populated country.

⁹ Haiti’s population is the highest in all of the Caribbean and in 2006 reached 9.6 million inhabitants. The World Bank, Country Data Profile, <http://devdata.worldbank.org/external/CPProfile.asp?SelectedCountry=HTI&CCODE=HTI&CNAME=Haiti&PTYPE=CP>

¹⁰ Haiti produces 90,000 tons of rice, and imports 360,000 tons. It imports 200,000 from the USA. “Pas de solution à court terme contre la faim”. <http://www.lenouvelliste.com/article.php?PubID=1&ArticleID=56335&PubDate=2008-04-11> and Dobbs, Michael, “Free Market Left Haiti’s Rice Growers Behind”, *Washington Post Foreign Service*, Thursday April 13, 2000 page A01.

country (the so-called Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity Through Partnership Encouragement Act or HOPE) promises to create thousands of jobs by taking advantage of the cheap cost of Haitian labour and redirecting national production to the textile industries.¹¹

Paralysed government

The food crisis put tremendous pressure on the Haitian government which did not respond to appease a hungry, angry population and stem the explosion of violence which ensued. Recent events have revealed serious problems within the political class, a lack of leadership and a breakdown in consensus, along with suspicions of renewed links between the government and armed gangs.

From January onwards, the hike in food prices has served as a backdrop to wider tensions within the country. By February this year, the population was already demanding state aid and government subsidies to offset soaring prices.¹² Initial government declarations indicated that it had no resources and no measures were announced to help the population. This government response earned it a motion of no confidence in Parliament on February 28 and days of protests outside the National Palace in Port-au-Prince. At the same time, speculation mounted regarding Prime Minister Jacques Édouard Alexis' ties to the old *chimères* demonstrating in front of the palace.¹³ A weak government with alleged links to the *chimères*, coupled with a furious and starving population amounted to a powder keg waiting to go off. In April, the situation exploded and thousands of protestors attempted to storm the National Palace. The price of transport soared by 50 percent in only a few days; 22 petrol stations were destroyed, and the *tap taps*,¹⁴ the traditional form of transport, stopped running for a number of days.

Internally, questions are being asked as to whether the protests were solely related to the rise in staple food prices. The nature of the unrest ought to set alarm bells ringing: vandalism, the looting of private businesses, widespread violence, fatal casualties, gunshot wounds, physical assaults on journalists, all of which are a sombre reminder of ex-President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's last days in power before his exile in February 2004.

Some observers state that clandestine meetings have been held in the last few months between Aristide's political party, Lavalas, and cells being formed in preparation for the 2011 elections.¹⁵ Events surrounding food price demonstrations have worked in Aristide's favour, and his supporters could well be taking advantage of this to foment chaos throughout the country. Moreover, renewed protests against the MINUSTAH contingent have occurred, calling on the "forces of occupation", as Aristide's followers call them, to leave the country.

¹¹ Nazaire St Fort, "Haiti: Once-vibrant farmers in dire straits", IPS News, March 4th 2008, <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=41454>

¹² The price of rice has doubled in six months. Christie, Michael, "Haiti not descending into instability – minister", Reuters. <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/KH11-7DJ3M5?OpenDocument&rc=2&emid=ACOS-635P2K>

¹³ "L'actualité en question", *Le Nouvelliste*, February 26, 2008. <http://www.lenouvelliste.com/article.php?PublID=1&ArticleID=54698>

¹⁴ Private transport service.

¹⁵ According to the UN, it is the criminal gangs which are regrouping, although key Lavalas figures have been sighted at the protests. "La fragilité de la situation en Haïti illustre le lien étroit entre stabilité politique et développement, souligne Hédi Annabi devant le Conseil de sécurité". CS/9292, Security Council.

Power and manipulation

The government's response has been lethargic and unconvincing. During the worst moments of the crisis, President Préval dithered for several days before addressing the nation and finally told Haitians that "violence is not going to solve the problem". He only made reference to long-term solutions and asked civil servants, who had recently received a pay increase of 35 percent, to share it with their "brothers and sisters". He also blamed the situation on 20 years of bad economic management, 17 of which were under governments of the Lavalas party.¹⁶ After waves of continuing disturbances, the president finally announced that the government and rice importers would provide a 15 percent discount on each sack of rice.

Both the population and Parliament were very unhappy with the government's handling of the situation, and 16 senators (from a Senate comprising 27 members) demanded the resignation of the Prime Minister. By April 12, the Prime Minister's second chance had come and gone and he was ousted by a motion of no confidence. Préval's response to events has, once again, been vague and he has sown more uncertainty regarding future political progress.

The ousting of the Prime Minister weeks before the donors' conference (set for April 24 and 25, but postponed) is evidence of a breakdown in the political consensus which was established when the government was formed after the election of Préval in 2006. Government, Parliament and the Senate have effectively ground to a halt as everybody waits for a new prime minister to be chosen. One international civil servant who knows the country well believes it likely that political life in Haiti will resort to the ways of the past, which is to say, that members of parliament will put private interests before their public duties once again.¹⁷

At the beginning of May, the President nominated Ericq Pierre for the vacant post. He is an agronomist with a brilliant career in the Inter-American Development Bank and enjoys the backing of the US Chamber of Commerce. Pierre, who had already been nominated for prime minister in 1997, was unable to muster sufficient support. Several members of parliament from the *Concertation des Parlementaires Progressistes* party as well others from Préval's party, Lespwa, refused to support his candidacy on the pretext that he did not have a birth certificate for his grandparents and that consequently it was impossible to check his nationality. In truth, it was parliament's way of showing how strong the feelings against the President were, and it effectively amounted to a split in the party.¹⁸ Days after the vote, there were intense reactions including accusations of political gamesmanship, corruption, and bribery, not to mention scandals being brought to light as a result of the clash between Préval and Alexis.

Préval's lack of leadership and conviction in recent weeks has been striking. Whilst politicians clash, consult, propose, vote and reject, the government is paralysed, taking no action to alleviate the food crisis, neglecting to set in motion its long since promised job creation programmes, and allowing political instability to envelop the country again. The political vacuum and the breakdown of political consensus jeopardises the progress made since the advent of the peace consolidation process.

¹⁶ Haiti-manifestations: René Préval, "propositions" et "vérités", published April 9, 2008, <http://www.haitipressnetwork.com/news.cfm?articleID=9878>

¹⁷ Interview with the author, May 19, 2008

¹⁸ 51 members of parliament voted against the candidacy of Ericq Pierre, 31 voted in favour and there were nine abstentions.

A step backwards for stability

Throughout 2007, the security situation in Haiti improved with an increase in the number of policemen and the arrest of more than 750 members of armed gangs. Poor neighbourhoods like Cite Soleil and Martissant were freed from the control of the armed gangs. The number of kidnappings was drastically reduced and a general sense of security was re-established.

Despite MINUSTAH's achievements and the international community's help in aiding the government to rehabilitate the country, the food crisis has shown just how vulnerable the state is when faced with destabilising threats, especially when their causes are external and have a strong internal impact. From a security perspective, the ability to anticipate or prevent a crisis is similar to that of 2004: almost nil. The significant number of people carrying arms in the country continues to pose a danger to the population. Whilst it may be true that the Haitian National Police force (or the PNH) has improved thanks to an increase in the number of officers and a purge of its ranks, international support is still required.¹⁹ The PNH has been criticised for its lack of professionalism when called on to protect the rights and property of the population at large and for its handling of the situation in general.²⁰

The material damage caused by the rioters and the economic consequences are catastrophic and will have long-term effects on the country. It is estimated that the cost of damage caused by protestors reached \$10 million in a single day, and the widespread paralysis which affected the country over seven days has cost an already chronically weak economy \$100 million. The government seems incapable of offering any kind of solution to those who have nothing at all, which erodes its legitimacy. Nor does it offer protection to private industry and investors, and many doubt it is prepared to take on that responsibility. If that is the case, it is a serious problem because the rehabilitation process requires an elite which participates, not one which conspires. The government lacks answers and shirks responsibility, something which will drive away investors and condemn the country to subsisting on international aid.

MINUSTAH has played a timid role during the crisis, all but absent as it unfolded. The mission's mandate is to assist the government in the democratic political process and it can use its good offices to do that. Whilst it is true that the line between good offices and interference in internal Haitian affairs is a fine one, the rejection of the Ericq Pierre nomination was a missed opportunity. Given that democratic tools like the no confidence motion and vote on the new prime minister were allegedly used as means to political ends, perhaps it would have been preferable for MINUSTAH to have acted more firmly with both government and Parliament. MINUSTAH could help to calm tensions and avoid votes being used for petty causes.

The elections for a third of the Senate, scheduled for May 18, are on hold until a new government has been formed. Similarly, the postponement of the high level conference which was to bring together multilateral and bilateral donors and the Haitian government means there has been no discussion of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper and the \$3.9 billion which would have thereby been triggered. With everything up in the air, ordinary people are the ones really suffering as a result.

The United Nations mission in Haiti celebrates its fourth anniversary in June. However, day to day life for most Haitians, and especially those living outside the capital in the regions, has barely changed. The state continues to be conspicuous by its absence, and there is no access to basic services such as health and education. Whilst GNP figures have been positive in the last year, economic development, job creation and a spur to national production are all required.

¹⁹ There are around 8,450 police in active service. "La fragilité de la situation en Haïti illustre le lien étroit entre stabilité politique et développement, souligne Hédi Annabi devant le Conseil de sécurité". CS/9292, Security Council report, morning session 5862e.

²⁰ RNDDH, "Position du RNDDH par rapport aux mouvements de protestation contre la cherté de la vie Déclaration de Pierre Espérance", April 9, 2008. http://www.rnddh.org/breve.php3?id_breve=53

This crisis has demonstrated three things: first of all, the weakness of the government and the need for a more responsible political class. Secondly, that MINUSTAH is going to have to remain in the country for some years to come. If the international community wants to help Haiti reach self-sufficiency it will have to concentrate more of its efforts on state-building. The mission bears a weighty responsibility with regard to the government and must assist in re-establishing consensus and a political process so that favourable conditions are in place to aid economic development.

Thirdly, the effect of globalisation and the vicissitudes it brings in its wake (most recently, the rising price of rice) forces us to rethink the economic model which is being promoted in the country. The underlying idea behind aid and development plans for Haiti is that one day, thanks to the liberalisation of its economy, the country will be able to produce and buy like a normal country. That presumption is erroneous. Haiti needs a coherent plan geared to food and energy self-sufficiency, the use of its own natural resources, and international aid to build a basic but decent infrastructure for its citizens. The liberal idea that "let's create wealth first, then development will follow" simply does not apply in a country like Haiti, as the families forced to rely on a diet of mud biscuits amply demonstrate.

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